

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#289**

**FRANCIS A. GINGRAS
USS *HELENA*, SURVIVOR**

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 6, 1998
BY DANIEL MARTINEZ**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

AUGUST 27, 2001

**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Daniel Martinez (DM): The following oral history interview was conducted by Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS *Arizona* Memorial. The taping took place at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 6, 1998 at approximately 6:20 p.m. The person being interviewed is Francis Gingras. Correct?

Francis Gingras (FG): *Si* [yes].

DM: From the USS *Helena*, CL-50. He was aboard this ship on December 7, 1941. For the record, Francis, do you go by Francis or do you have...

FG: Francis is perfect. I don't mind at all.

DM: Okay, Francis, could you state your full name?

FG: Francis Augustus Gingras.

DM: And where were you, what was your place of birth?

FG: New Raymer, Colorado.

DM: And what was your date of birth?

FG: Nine, sixteen, twenty-three.

DM: And could you tell me what you considered your hometown in 1941?

FG: Oh I'd say Grand Junction is as close as you get.

DM: Grand Junction, Colorado.

FG: I really didn't have that much of a home, but Grand Junction was close to it. That's where my mother was most of the time.

DM: Tell me a little bit about your family. How many kids in your family?

FG: Four. One brother and two sisters.

DM: And where were you primarily raised at? What city?

FG: Well, we was born on a homestead in eastern Colorado, New Raymer. But my father was in the Second Infantry Division in France in World War I. When he came back, his lungs was burned out with mustard and he had a bad foot. And when I was six or seven, he passed away. And my mother was sick too, [*but*] she raised the kids. Actually she did a good job because right now everybody is in good health basically and living comfortably.

DM: Those were tough times.

FG: Oh, yes.

DM: You were in the midst of the Great Depression as well.

FG: That's right, yes.

DM: Did you or your brothers or sisters take jobs to help support the family?

FG: Oh, I used to work at a golf course and a few other things like that.

DM: You did? What'd you do at the golf course?

FG: Caddy mostly.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: After school, [*in*] the third grade, I'd leave, the schoolhouse [*it was*] right across from the golf course, and go over and pick up a quarter a night.

DM: Is that right? Now where was this at?

FG: That was in Grand Junction.

DM: Is the golf course still there?

FG: That I wouldn't know. I haven't been to Grand Junction in years.

DM: Do you remember the name of the golf course?

FG: Yes, as a matter of fact. It was the Mesa County Country Club, I believe.

DM: Mesa County Country Club. You grew up in that neighborhood. Did you go to high school there as well?

FG: I never went to high school.

DM: So you went to elementary school?

FG: The last school grade I went to was in Phoenix.

DM: Okay.

FG: And I got out of the ninth grade in Phoenix.

DM: And then what'd you do?

FG: I never went to high school. Well, I just moved around mostly. California some and Utah and sometimes back with my mother.

DM: But you were on your own? You were kind of finding your way.

FG: Half, and about three-quarters, yes.

DM: Yeah. So you did a variety of jobs during that time?

FG: Well, yes. I worked stock around Durango and when I was a youngster, before I joined the navy, I was working down [*in*] New Mexico and I seen a recruiting poster that showed a hula girl, a battleship and sunshine, and it was cold in New Mexico and I joined the navy.

DM: That was it.

FG: That was it.

DM: The power of Madison Avenue, huh?

FG: Had a lot to do, and I was hungry. That had a lot to do with it.

DM: So where'd you enlist at?

FG: Albuquerque.

DM: And you were accepted?

FG: Well, yes.

DM: First time?

FG: As a matter of fact, I never went to high school except the ninth grade, and that was intermediate school.

DM: Right.

FG: So you had to be a high school graduate to get in the Navy.

DM: Right.

FG: But my entrance exam, I only missed a couple of questions.
I used to love to read.

DM: Okay.

FG: So they took me without any problem.

DM: And where did you go to boot camp at?

FG: Well, I went to Denver to get sworn in.

DM: Right.

FG: And that was kind of unique because I hadn't been eating too good, so for three weeks the navy paid for me to go down to a restaurant and eat three meals a day. They had to document every one. And I lived in a Franklin Delano Roosevelt Hotel and they paid me a dollar and a half a day subsistence money, but when I got to San Diego, I only got twenty-one dollars a month! (Chuckles)

DM: (Chuckles) So you had to take a cut in pay, right?

FG: [Yes].

DM: Now, why would the navy do that? Was that to increase your health or...

FG: [Yes], I passed my [*Physical Exam*] good and I had no problems as far as the law went or anything like that.

DM: Okay. So did you go to San Diego next, you said?

FG: Yes, San Diego boot camp.

DM: What was boot camp like?

FG: Well, interesting actually. Most of the people that I run [*into*] at boot camp [*were excellent*], we had two chief petty officers whose whole idea was to teach people. There was no animosity between them and the kids. And once in a while you run into that. Some people have the attitude that they're got a superior feeling against somebody, but I didn't run into that at boot camp. I had two good chief petty officers and we learned quite a bit.

DM: What was the thing you liked the most about boot camp?

FG: Oh, food.

DM: What's the thing you liked the least?

FG: There wasn't any really dislike because I had been too much on my own. I remember a lot of the people or most of 'em that had just come from a home, you know.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: Why, they didn't like the food or they didn't like to have to get up or this or that. That didn't bother me a bit.

DM: You know, you've mentioned this, Francis, and I hope you don't mind. I really, really want to know this. You say you spent a lot of time on your own. You mean, you were spending, during that time in your life, you were trying to make your way through life and you were living alone?

FG: Well, that's true. I was in California. I caddied at the, oh, Twentieth Century Fox Golf Course for a while.

DM: Okay.

FG: And I got other kind of jobs around. And I had an ear problem though, and when the state found out, I had to go to County Hospital, found out that I was only fourteen or fifteen, they booted me out.

DM: You mean you were on your own at fourteen or fifteen?

FG: They sent me back to Grand Junction.

DM: Now, were you—you weren't a runaway. Did your parents...

FG: No, no.

DM: Your parents, your mother knew.

FG: My mother was sick.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: My two sisters was kind of farmed out and my brother was kind of farmed out, working on a farm. And I was more or less just on my own.

DM: Were you always kind of an independent kid?

FG: Well, I had no intentions of being farmed out to somebody. That was for sure.

DM: Was that one of the best educations you had, to try to find your way through life, in that early...

FG: Let's put it this way, it ain't that easy when you've slept in a couple of culverts and a lot of haystacks and whatnot. Of course you see that around here too. Every morning, I get up in the morning to watch somebody walking down the

street. I know good and well they crawled out of a gutter somewhere, you know.

DM: So do you have empathy for those people?

FG: What?

DM: Do you have empathy for those people?

FG: Oh, I understand what they're going through.

DM: For one reason or another, that's what their life is right now.

FG: Mm-hm.

DM: And for you know, the navy now gave you a new opportunity?

FG: The navy was perfect for me.

DM: Yeah.

FG: First I liked it and when I boarded ship, in reality, the people that I worked for on a ship were outstanding. I never had any problem at all.

DM: No discipline problem?

FG: Well, I was used to working, so I did my job.

DM: And what was your job in the navy? What'd they decided was going to be...

FG: Well, mostly as a seaman.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: I done everything from scrape paint to carry ammunition to load stores, to just about anything that they could want you to do.

DM: Yeah.

FG: And then I wanted...

DM: It sounds like, Francis—excuse me for interrupting.

FG: Oh, I was going to say they had to send three people to machine gun school in Pearl.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And because I'd had fairly high marks on my mechanical, I was one of those people that went to that machine gun school at Pearl.

DM: Would it be fair to say, Francis, that the navy validated you as a person? You felt like you belonged now to something?

FG: Oh, I did that. I always have. Still do. There's no question on that. Matter of fact, after I retired from the Navy, I taught for the Navy for ten years, weapons at the gunners' mate school in Great Lakes.

DM: Is that right? Now, when you came out of San Diego, you were assigned a ship?

FG: I was assigned to the USS *Helena*.

DM: So that was your ship and how long did you serve on the *Helena*?

FG: Well, from about May of '41 until the fourth or fifth of July, 1943, whenever we got sunk, whatever it was.

DM: Yeah, down in Guadalcanal.

FG: Yes, Guadalcanal area.

DM: We're going to talk a little bit about that. That's pretty fascinating. As the clouds of war were gathering throughout the world—the war had broken out in '39 in Europe—did you have any sense or feeling when you went out to the Pacific with the *Helena*, that...

FG: Well, I used to...

DM: ...United States might be involved?

FG: ...read.

DM: You read a lot.

FG: Matter of fact, I'll put it this way, when I was on the ship and the radiomen would copy from the UP [*United Press*] and whatnot, which they weren't supposed to, certain copies of news, I was one of those that always wanted a copy of that news, because I liked to know what was going on.

DM: Have you always loved books?

FG: Well, yes. I like to read. I'm not the brightest person, but I like to read. I can't—I have difficult reading now, [*eyes*]. As a matter of fact, right now I'm reading a real story about the sea battles. Real story. My hats off to the British Navy, by the way. After reading that book, them poor bas—I mean, them poor gentlemen...

DM: You can say what you want.

FG: ...really took it in the chin. But they kept trying.

DM: You talk about World War II or...?

FG: Yes, World War II.

DM: Yeah, they, well, they've had a pretty tough outfit themselves, those sailors. But did you think the clouds of war would touch, ever touch the Pacific Fleet...

FG: Well, I'm too young to do this. I mean, politics and whatnot. I know we were worried about it. I know that we were, on the *Helena*, once in Long Beach and a "*Maru*" came by. That's a Japanese type ship.

DM: Right.

FG: And they rowed over to our ship and the commanding officer sent 'em away, wouldn't even let 'em come aboard. That I remember that.

DM: So the tension was there?

FG: Oh yes.

DM: Now, what was—when you went to Hawaii for the first time, what'd you think of that place?

FG: Oh, compared to now, [*it was*] the most beautiful place you could go. They had a little train that would go around part of the island...

DM: Right.

FG: ...and you could go through pineapple fields and cane fields and it was really a beautiful place. Now it's a piece of garbage.

DM: (Chuckles)

FG: Pardon the expression.

DM: That's my home you're talking about! (Laughs)

FG: Well, I was out there...

DM: I understand.

FG: I was out there for the *Helena*, I mean for Pearl Harbor Survivors, the last time we were there- [*reunion*].

DM: In '91?

FG: Yes. And I rented a hotel at—well, the hotel we stayed next to the, oh...

DM: You were at the Sheraton, weren't you?

FG: No.

DM: Next to the Royal Hawaiian?

FG: Next to the Royal Hawaiian.

DM: That's the Sheraton Hotel.

FG: Oh, Sheraton. That's right. And I wanted a mountain view. Well, my mountain view included two little slots between two big buildings!

DM: Yeah.

FG: [*Yes*].

DM: Waikiki had changed.

FG: [Yes]. But the time before that, I had been out there. I was stationed out there in 1958, '59 and '60...

DM: Oh, okay.

FG: ...on the destroyer, *John S. McCain*.

DM: Okay.

FG: And it was nice then. But right now, I just think that Hawaii and especially Oahu has got so many people. It seems to me that there's about 1.3 million people on the island and it's only, if I remember right, only about twenty-five miles by forty miles. Somewhere in that vicinity.

DM: Yeah, it's a large metropolitan city now.

FG: [Yes].

DM: But going back to 1940, '41, it was a beautiful place to go to?

FG: Oh, yes.

DM: Did you enjoy liberty there?

FG: Oh, I did.

DM: Yeah.

FG: Although I didn't drink. I was never much of a drinker.

DM: Why is that?

FG: Well, one reason at that time, they wouldn't let you drink.

DM: You were too young.

FG: If you were seventeen or eighteen, yeah. Second, I just never cared that much for liquor anyway.

DM: Okay. Didn't like the taste of it?

FG: No, didn't like the taste. It made me sick and I hated the feeling you get. Don't get me wrong, I [*have*] sampled some a couple times.

DM: (Laughs) Now, there's other activities that were available to sailors that...

FG: Well, the navy had a lot of recreation areas around there.

DM: Right.

FG: But we were at sea so much that you didn't get a chance to do too much there. We were always training. I know a week before the assault, by Japan, we were at sea, ready to go to war. We were out there going through maneuvers and we were going to get medical lessons, lectures by the hour almost, on how you would take care of this kind of wound and that kind of wound and that's a week before the war started. And then the following week, for some reason, we let our guard down and we got clobbered.

DM: Now, I had a fellow from the *Monaghan* in here earlier. He said that his particular ship...

FG: Oh, *Monaghan*, what's his name?

DM: Yeah, that was Finnern?

FG: Finnern, [*yes*], from Wisconsin.

DM: He said that he felt his ship had a very experienced crew, that they had people in place that had been in the navy for some time and he said it was a very efficient crew. Would you say that about the *Helena*? That the *Helena*...

FG: Oh, there's no question on that. When we got hit, during the attack, everybody stayed at their gun. [*There*—was very little fire. The damage control people, [*closed the ship up to keep from sinking, also*] because when you got an open ship and you got a torpedo hit, you're going to get, everybody gets burned.

DM: Right.

FG: We had about, oh, I'd say [*thirty*] to [*forty*] dead and probably at least that many casualties, mostly from burns. [*Thirty-three KIA aboard USS Helena on 7 DEC 1941*]

DM: Well, let's take you back to December 6, 1941.

FG: Oh.

DM: What's that...

FG: Good statement on the ship, the night before the war started was the movie, *Hold Back the Dawn*.

DM: Is that the name of the movie?

FG: That was the name of the movie. That movie was going around several places, probably several ships, but that was the name of the movie we had that night, was *Hold Back the Dawn*.

DM: Did you watch the movie?

FG: No, as a matter of fact, I didn't.

DM: What did you do the night of December 6, which by the way is 157 years ago, rather fifty-seven years ago today?

FG: I went ashore.

DM: Okay.

FG: There's always a possibility, but I was side cleaning at that time. I was not working with my division. I was working, you know, cleaning the sides of the [*ship, cleaning and painting*].

DM: Right.

FG: I'll never forgive the Japanese. We just painted the whole starboard side of the ship.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And then the next morning, they planted a torpedo that just ruined our paint job. (DM laughs) Now, I can forgive 'em for the war, but I'll be darned if I can forgive 'em for that paint job.

DM: Were you involved in some of that painting?

FG: Oh yes. Yes. But after that, I didn't have to go back because being a loader on an anti-aircraft gun, why we just lived on that gun.

DM: Top priority.

FG: We didn't move and...

DM: Let's talk—so the evening of December 6 ends for you. Did you have the watch at all that night, or what were you...

FG: I couldn't remember. I don't believe I did though.

DM: Well, let's then take you to...

FG: 'Cause I didn't stand, in my division, I didn't stand many...

DM: Watches?

FG: ...steaming watches or sea watch, inboard watches.

DM: What was your division? What was your job aboard ship?

FG: Well, I was seaman until the war started. The day the war started, the navy advanced everybody one rank. If you were a seaman second, that's what I was, you was automatically advanced to seaman.

DM: And what division were you in on December 7?

FG: Oh, that's the question. I believe I was in the 6th Division.

DM: Okay.

FG: But later on, after we had went back to Mare Island, and put on, instead of 1.1 anti-aircraft, forty millimeter and twenty millimeter [*guns*], they changed the structure around and I went into the 5th Division.

DM: Okay.

FG: Of which I stayed into until we went swimming.

DM: Okay. Let's take you back to December 7, 1941. How did your day start out that morning?

FG: Well, I was just getting ready to go paint the anchor.

DM: So you had breakfast?

FG: Yes.

DM: Got up about six a.m.?

FG: [Yes]. And I was just getting ready to go paint the anchor. They just said that—and I was wondering how the devil I was going to paint the anchor, 'cause I hadn't really been working on that job that much. Then all of a sudden, they passed the word, "All hands man your battle stations. Japanese planes attacking Ford Island."

And I'll always remember that expression. No question on that.

DM: Was that over the loudspeaker?

FG: Yes.

DM: Now, did you see anything before that? Planes or...

FG: No, but I got topside. I mean, my berthing compartment was right next to the hatch going up to the main deck.
[*Note: Hangers were on fire on Ford Island*]

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And, believe me now, when you're [*eighteen*] you can scramble pretty fast. And I was up that ladder and up to my gun. That's what we'd been trained for, get up there as fast as you can. And I was over on the starboard side and I could see the plane, I seen him drop the torpedo. Now I don't remember the torpedo in the water, because I was running towards the [*gun*]. I know that this jackass was smiling when he went over the ship.

DM: Why is that?

FG: A lot of my friends died on that ship. And I'll always remember that [*smile*].

DM: Now, where was your gun station? It was starboard side, mid-ship?

FG: I was—no. Starboard side, aft.

DM: Starboard side, aft.

FG: On the second deck.

DM: And what size gun was it?

FG: What?

DM: What size gun was it?

FG: One-point-one anti-aircraft one, which was... [*"About 28mm", explosive shell*]

DM: One of the new ones.

FG: ...an open gun. At that time, it was a new one. Later on, we took them off and put forty millimeters on there.

DM: How effective were those guns?

FG: Short range, good.

DM: You couldn't throw a lead out there?

FG: But we had no power drive. Our power drive was manual, [*but we fired.*]

DM: You're kidding?

FG: After the torpedo hit, then a couple bombs hit someplace, because the guy on [*the trainer*] side, he was just cut to pieces with shrapnel.

DM: Shrapnel? Next to you?

FG: And the guy standing [*next*] to me was hit. And the guy [*to the left*] was hit. And I didn't get touched. But he was, they weren't hit bad. But this guy had already been burned so bad that they finally sent him to the hospital.

DM: Let's—if you don't mind, I'd like to go back to this torpedo, which is...

FG: Yes sir.

DM: ...is the—you are moored along Ten-Ten Dock?

FG: Yes.

DM: Outboard moored [*to*] you was the minelayer, *Oglala*.

FG: Yes it was.

DM: The torpedo now passed underneath the *Oglala* and hit the ship where?

FG: About mid-ship's.

DM: And when that torpedo exploded, what did it damage? Where did it go into?

FG: Well, outside of the fact that the blast, which I didn't really see because when I was running, when the ship jolted, I ran right into the bulkhead.

DM: You did?

FG: Yes. And I was knocked cuckoo for a minute or two. Always remember that because the first class boatswain mate, name of Clinton was slapping me in the face, saying, "Are you hurt?"

DM: And he was waking you up, right?

FG: I was hurt.

DM: So you struck your head on the bulkhead?

FG: [Yes]. I [*did*]*—immediately, I jumped up and went over and a couple of people were then getting the gun cover off the 1.1 and we got the cover off. And as far as I know, we started shooting just as soon as we could get some ammunition. [We had ready ammunition at the gun.]*

DM: I know you didn't know this then, but you knew it later. How serious was the damage down below?

FG: Oh...

DM: And what had happened to the crew that was down there?

FG: Not many people were in the engine room because there was no reason for it. People [*were*] burned and hurt because we'd had not had any damage control doors closed, which helped the ship. You know, the watertight doors and things like that, all the way up, were open. The blast came from the engine rooms [*went*] right up [*through*] all them doors and all them people in the living compartments just

literally burned. But in my living compartment, about thirty people died, 'cause the blast just come right up the hatch.

DM: They were just—were they, for lack of a better word, scalded or incinerated?

FG: Just burned, just flash-burned.

DM: Flash burns.

FG: Yes.

DM: And that'll kill you just a flash?

FG: Oh yes, because it's just like walking through fire or more so.

DM: How serious was the damage below? Were you taking on water?

FG: Well, the ship, no, as far as I know, from just looking at the pictures later, most of the damage control—which was very effective by the way—got everything closed enough so we didn't sink very much at all. Had we taken another a torpedo or two, it might've been different, but we didn't. 'Cause by this time, they knew that we were in the wrong spot and the flagship was someplace else.

DM: Right.

FG: We got hit probably the first simply because they were after the flagship and that's where we were.

DM: Right.

FG: Because that was where the flagship always tied up.

DM: Yeah, the battleship *Pennsylvania*.

FG: Yes.

DM: Now, what happened to the *Oglala* next to you?

FG: I remember seeing the *Oglala* and then I didn't see it any more. Now, I'm a loader [*on the 1.1 inch gun on the second deck, we were busy*]

DM: Right.

FG: And pretty soon, it isn't there any more and later on it was sunk behind us. [*Tugs moved toe Oglala.*]

DM: Okay, so all that you knew, she was there...

FG: I paid no attention.

DM: You didn't see the tugs coming in or...

FG: No.

DM: ...getting her moved.

FG: No, because we were...

DM: And then she capsized.

FG: ...busy firing a gun. We fired a lot of rounds that day.

DM: Do you think you bagged any planes that day?

FG: Yes. [*Collective - I sincerely believe that no one gun shot any plane down. The battleships were firing there many machine guns. Everyone was shooting.*]

DM: What do you think you got?

FG: That's something I'm not going to tell you, but...

DM: Why is that?

FG: Well, a plane came, passed us and [*the trainer was*] dead. We can't train the gun, yet. Couldn't get him out. But the pointer elevated the gun and the plane went through those shells.

DM: So you just fired...

FG: [*Yes*].

DM: ...and flew into the rounds.

FG: And then he turned around, went down by Aiea landing and came back almost the same direction. And he went through those tracers again. By this time, he's slumped over. And he crashed into the hospital.

DM: Oh, that's the one that crashed into the hospital.

FG: Hospital. Now, if you'll turn that thing off a minute, I'll tell you something else.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

DM: That day, you say that a lot of things happened in flashes. Were you still a little woozy from hitting the bulkhead, or did you get your senses back?

FG: No, no. My senses were, [*good*] lord, I stayed on the gun. A matter of fact, I had a rather nice compliment.

DM: How's that?

FG: Well, I'm [*eighteen*], you know, just turned eighteen and this gunner's mate come out of the clipping room, for clipping ammunition and clips that I was putting in a gun. And he asked that boatswain mate, he says, "Well, how's he doing?"

And old Swede is a gruff old gentleman. But he says, "All right, you son of a bitch, he's out here shooting and you're in there hiding!"

(Chuckles) Excuse my English, but that was the way it was.

DM: No, that's fine.

FG: That was the quote. I'll always remember the Swede.

DM: The Swede. The *Helena* survived that day. Do you remember seeing—you said you had a really good – could you see Battleship Row and what was going on?

FG: Oh, as a matter of fact, my position, I seen everything. I seen the battleship *Oklahoma* roll over. I seen it take at least two torpedoes. I seen the *California*, because it was closer to us, take three torpedoes. I watched the *Arizona* blow up. I watched the destroyer *Shaw* blow up. I watched the *Nevada* on its way out the harbor, burning until it hit the beach.

DM: Right. Did any of this kind of seem almost surreal to you? That this was actually happening?

FG: No. I knew what was happening, mostly from the talk of the other people, maybe.

DM: But to see this carnage and this wreckage?

FG: Well, that's what we trained for. I say people stayed at their guns.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And we had, later on, when I retired, for some unknown reason, they had a big party and stuff because I was basically the last enlisted man, I think, that had maybe been at Pearl [*Harbor*].

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: That was on active duty, [*not reserve (30+) years*]. But there was a captain that was retiring and he had never been anyplace in his whole navy career. And he was talking about Pearl and he said he didn't recognize Pearl because we didn't win that battle. Well, I explained to him that for the officers and the men on them ships, they did perfect, [*and*] that we were not responsible for our leadership. And our leadership is what caused that problem. Although I bring up something else here now. After reading this other book I've been reading about and reading several other books about the war, the best thing that ever happened to the United States government, unfortunately, was the Japanese attack on Pearl. Because that caused us to get in the war with Germany, which saved England. Had we not done that, we would've been isolated out here and the rest of the world would've been under the domination of Adolph and maybe, just maybe our supply lines would've been closed off enough, like tin and rubber and things like that, that we would've been eventually forced to capitulate to some kind of world government. It's hard to say, you know.

DM: Yeah, the democracies hung in the balance, didn't it?

FG: That's exactly right. We had to get some kind of help to the British. Now, I realize that now.

DM: You know, that's a heck of an experience for a seventeen-year-old kid to go through. You must've been a seventeen-year-old man when it was all over.

FG: Let's put it this way, you become a veteran fast. Without question. Of course now you got to remember there were dozens of seventeen-year-olds. Actually, I was two months into eighteen. I was a little older than that.

DM: We're going to stop right here and change tape and we'll probably go on for about ten minutes. I want to talk...

END OF TAPE #12

TAPE #13

DM: The raid was over in two hours. You saw all this carnage that took place.

FG: Mm-hm. Well, [yes.]

DM: What was your feeling after the raid was over.

FG: Well, you know after the torpedo, there were, three or four dive bombers—not torpedo planes—started coming down on us and we were looking up at 'em and then all of a sudden they peeled off because then the battleship *Nevada* was heading out to harbor. They went over to hit the *Nevada* and there were people on the *Nevada* was falling over the side and everything else because they were getting hit hard. They lost a lot of people.

DM: So would you validate what some of other survivors, and I've done a lot of work on the *Nevada*, that when the *Nevada* started moving, she drew fire away from...

FG: Oh, that's true they were after them. They wanted in the worst way to sink the *Nevada* in the mouth of the harbor and that way nothing could get in or out.

DM: Bottle her up.

FG: They wanted to close it as far as a naval base went.

DM: From the photographs I've collected, she took a severe pounding.

FG: Yes.

DM: You were close to this. The noise must have been horrific during that time.

FG: Well, noise, yes. But I tell you, if you want to know the truth, the sound of those explosions [*was*] not anywhere [*near*] as [*loud*] as the bombs that I [*heard*] off Vietnam.

DM: Okay.

FG: I tell you. Those even twelve miles off, boy, they just punctured your ears.

DM: At the end of the day, the *Helena* is—the fleet's been severely damaged.

FG: Mm-hm.

DM: What did you think the next day would bring?

FG: Well, nobody knew. We were just hoping, nobody [*knew if*], they were coming back. And then we seen carrier planes and everybody thought, well, the carriers were back because some of the planes off the *Lexington* came in.

DM: Yeah. The *Enterprise*.

FG: [Yes], of course. Nobody really realized that we didn't have that much of a military force.

DM: Do you remember that night when they fired on the...

FG: I do...

DM: ...*Enterprise* planes?

FG: Well, I do, because, I was up on my gun. But we are proud on the *Helena*, because we did not fire one shot.

DM: You knew those were friendly planes.

FG: We had hoped they were.

DM: It had been announced.

FG: We had good gunnery people up above and they knew they were our planes and they did not fire. We did not fire one round.

DM: One eyewitness to this, who was in the plane, said it was horrifying. His name is Jim Daniels. He's the only one who got a plane down. But he said it was the greatest fireworks show he had ever seen, but he was in the middle of it.

FG: [Yes].

DM: Would that be a pretty good description?

FG: Yes. It was large. Of course I've seen that kind of shooting off Okinawa and whatnot, and down in the Solomons.

DM: Yeah. Where was the *Helena* repaired at?

FG: Mare Island, Naval Base and then...

DM: Did you get your guns there too?

FG: Well, we put on forty millimeters, twenty millimeters and then sometime about in May, we headed to the South Pacific with a convoy.

DM: Tell me about the loss of the *Helena*.

FG: Well...

DM: You were aboard her.

FG: Oh yes. Well, we'd been in several naval actions, air-surface actions, shore bombardments and Guadalcanal and all of the islands up through [*the chain*,] as we were working north. That was a light cruiser's job, mostly was to get out and do this. And we...we did, just kept shooting and shooting, as they said, it moved on, that's what our job was.

DM: Right.

FG: We were lucky in several engagements. We were in the center of 'em, but we were always lucky to have minimum casualties, especially November 13, 1942, of which we had very, maybe twenty-five casualties and one or two killed, I think. Where at that same night, I think the navy lost 1700 people.

DM: Right.

FG: Of course, and I'm not sure that figure may include the cruiser *Juneau*, which I watched blow up the next day.

DM: You did?

FG: Yes. Well, being a topside gunner, [*I seen a*] torpedo came in and the torpedo hit the *Juneau*, like any other torpedo and then [*a*] flash, [*a*] little smoke, but mostly a lot of water come up. And then all of a sudden, there was a puff of smoke and there was nothing.

DM: You think it broke her in two?

FG: No. They just blew up.

DM: That's where the Sullivan brothers died.

FG: Yes. I watched—I seen a whole five-inch gun mount fly over our ship and drop behind the destroyer up ahead, the *Fletcher*. And I always used to think that was I seeing something, but I belong to the Guadalcanal veterans and they have a magazine called *The Guadalcanal Diary*. And the commanding officer of the *Fletcher* had mentioned that gun mount hitting just behind his ship. So I know it was true.

DM: That was from the *Juneau*?

FG: Yes. From the *Juneau*.

DM: How far did it throw that gun out?

FG: Oh, at least a mile and a half, or maybe two miles. Of course that's a lot of power, you know, that explosion. Of course, after that, I didn't stick around because after everything goes up, [*it*] comes down, I dived under a turret! when I seen that gun mount go [*over us*].

DM: Yeah, 'cause that's open, right?

FG: But we're lucky. We had a couple people scratched [*from falling piers*], that's about it.

DM: Tell me about the events on the night, in the Kula Gulf, when the *Helena* was lost.

FG: Well...

DM: Describe that for me.

FG: Now, most of my gun crew had scattered, on a twenty-millimeter anti-aircraft, when [*there*] using the turrets, you just tried to find a place to where you're away from the [*where the*] guns are pointing, because, I mean, they're deadly, you know. But I was up on the bow. Me and a guy by the name of Bill Myers was up on the -- I was [*in*] the gun tub, twenty-millimeter gun because I had the phones on. Somebody had to stay. And I just went out [*and talked*] to a friend of mine, name of Nolting, behind turret one and we had a lull. We just reported a bunch of torpedoes. We went through some torpedo trace and we'd been shooting. And then I went back to the gun tub and all of a sudden a wall of water hit me and I just went flying back and I give old Bill Myers credit. He grabbed me. I don't know where he was. I was heading over the side and he jumped over that lifeline and just married him and me into the lifelines until the water [*pressure*] went down. I got hit pretty hard because my helmet—and those helmets are hard—was literally [*dented.*]

DM: What was that?

FG: What?

DM: What caused that water? Was it a torpedo hit?

FG: The torpedo. First, we got hit with three torpedoes. Now, contrary to all these people that I read these books, we got

hit with three torpedoes. We got hit with one that blew the bow off. About two or three minutes later, and I know it had to be two or three minutes because Bill picked me up and carried—my legs were hurtin’— and carried me up on the next deck. Just literally like a flour sack up on the next deck. And then we heard two more—I mean the ship bounced twice. And then, at that time, we knew it was time to bail out ‘cause we had no bow and a couple of marines had got out of turret three and was dropping life rafts [*from the*] top of turret three. Most of the people in turret one and turret two were dead. And the magazines on turret three.

And then Bill put me in the life raft and he just was walking about leg deep [*in water*] on the deck, pushing the life raft off. And...

DM: She was going down, huh?

FG: [*Yes*]. Then we had to get [*off*] the rafts because too many shells were flopping around in the water, you know?

DM: What do you mean flopping around in the water?

FG: Well, I don’t know if they were shooting at the life rafts or whatnot. It could’ve been.

DM: Japanese?

FG: Could’ve been us too.

DM: Now, were there—in a night action like that, did you guys use your searchlights to light a target?

FG: No, we didn’t. No [*ship did, we learned not to in a previous action.*]

DM: Did the Japanese like to do that?

FG: No, not that I recall. Neither one.

DM: One of the things that's been written in naval history is these guys were pretty good at night fighting. Would you verify that?

FG: I would say. They had the weapons. You see, all our weapons is just like half of 'em are now, was bought from people that influenced the men of Congress through often devious means, and probably still are, and well, [*and if*] today we had to land a 150,000 jar heads. We don't have any guns at all. Them jar heads are going to go in there and be slaughtered. See, we have no weapons at all to back them up. Oh them Congressmen going to swear up and down we got all them beautiful missiles. That missile isn't very big and they can knock down a plane and it might stop one machine gun someplace, but if you've got forty machine guns, who's going to get all the other of 'em? Most ships don't carry more than forty or fifty of them missiles.

DM: So going back to the *Helena* and that experience.

FG: [*Yes*].

DM: You were—the Japanese had these weapons that were very good at night fighting.

FG: [*Yes*]. The torpedo. The torpedo was their weapon.

DM: That more advanced torpedoes was an effective weapon. And that's what hit you, right?

FG: [*Yes*].

DM: Three of those.

FG: That's right.

DM: Broke the ship up. How many guys got off the *Helena*?

FG: Well, 276 were missing in action. That I know, or around that figure. I'm pretty sure it's 276. Then there were quite a number of other people, like a friend of mine that may be here now, Underwood. I haven't seen him yet. And he's a Mormon from Utah, but he spent most of the rest of the war in the hospital.

DM: Badly hurt from all this.

FG: Yes.

DM: How extensive was your injuries?

FG: Oh, not bad. I floated some and then one of the destroyers left a boat and we tied all the life rafts behind the boat and we made it to Munda, which the Japanese [*had. And*] where marine raiders were fighting the Japanese in a place called Rice Anchorage, I think.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: About twenty miles down the beach. And we stayed there for a day or two. And then Marine [Corps] fighter plane spotted us and then immediately the destroyer *Gwin* picked us up. But there were other people on the *Helena* that wound up on another island, called Vella Lavella.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And they got picked up without much problem too. I will give credit—to a B-24, that dropped all their safety equipment, life rafts and everything, to us in the water. I seen that happen.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And later on, I understand, that B-24 got hit by two or three Zeroes and if they'd went down, they'd had no safety [*equipment*]. No safety rafts or anything.

DM: I don't know what it's like to lose a ship.

FG: To what?

DM: I don't know what it's like to lose a ship, your home.

FG: Well...

DM: The *Helena* had been your home for—you'd been through some pretty tough stuff with her. What was your feeling of, and what is your feeling now about the *Helena*?

FG: Oh, well, I enjoyed the people on it and whatnot, but I'm a realist and it's now and that was then. [*I go to all Helena reunions.*]

DM: Right. How did you feel then?

FG: Well, the thing is that you're right. You kinda feel lost. Of course, morale was good. I'll say that. Everybody was saying, "Give me another ship."

Actually Bill Myers—I think that was his name. I'm not sure. We were trying to get [*assigned to*] the destroyer *Gwin* [*for duty*], which I'm glad we didn't. They got sunk a month later. But the key was that—of course, everybody in those days, even us poor seamen that didn't get much information, [*but we*] realized that we were fighting for the existence of our country. Unlike Korea and 'Nam and whatnot, the thing was that our country was an important thing to most of

these people. Morale was pretty good and that's about all I can say on that. Just...

DM: It's just that, you know, I've had people talk about, Pearl Harbor survivors that lost their ships at Pearl. Some never really got over it. That had been their home, their way of life.

FG: Anytime you have a war, you go to any VA hospital and whatever, you're going to wind up with hundreds of people that have been in a combat areas or some in combat, some close to it now, but they're going to be emotionally distraught or whatever for the rest of their lives. They're just not going to come out of it. Some people are this way. Well, you find that in all facts of life. Some people with bad homes or something.

DM: Right.

FG: And [*sometimes*] people with good homes, it's hard to say, you know, personalities are different.

DM: But if I understand the way you explained it, when you lost your ship, you knew that was a reality of war.

FG: Well, yes.

DM: And you had to move on.

FG: And as a matter of fact...

DM: Get another ship.

FG: ...that's what I did. I wound up on the [*USS*] *American Legion*, that's a transport.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: See, I wound up in Guadalcanal. We had been taken back there. And then [*we got*] on the *American Legion*. I was in their hospital area for a while, because my legs were swollen up like, I mean like watermelons.

DM: What had happened to your legs?

FG: Well, because I had been in that torpedo blast. I'm right up there in the front where the torpedo hit. My friend, Nolting, he was—I used to go ashore with him and he was gone, dead.

DM: What about losing friends? That's something different, isn't it?

FG: Well, you realize that too, you know. I mean, it's just, by this point, you understand, it's just like infantry people, you pass cigarettes around today and tomorrow you pass cigarettes with somebody else. Because somebody didn't come back, see. That's war. Unfortunately, that's what it was.

DM: Is there anything that you want to say? I'm going to bring the interview to an end and about what this whole Pearl Harbor story means to our country? What do you think, how it fits? How does this lesson fit in today's society? Is it still relevant?

FG: Oh, I don't know. Honest, I don't. I know one thing, that's we should and the people in the country should be more nationalistic than what we are. But then again, greed seems to be more of our way of life than anything else, is get the almighty dollar and the devil with the country. Until, of course, somebody starts to kick our tail again, and if we don't have enough weapons, they will.

DM: Is there anything that you wanted to say that wasn't—did you want to talk about?

FG: Oh, I—no. I say one thing: after the *Helena*, I went to a PCE [*Patrol Vessel, Escort*] and chased submarines in the South Atlantic for a while.

DM: Uh-huh.

FG: And we dropped a lot of depth charges, hedge hogs, because there was a lot of subs over there and once in a while there'd be a life raft with somebody on it and you'd try to identify the individual and bury him at sea and if possible. Maybe American, maybe British, maybe whatever. And then I went on a APA [*Attack Transport*] and made Iwo Jima and Okinawa. And all I can say is thank god for the bomb.

Now I don't care what jackass stands up and says we didn't need that bomb, but when you're sitting out there and you're about ready to die—and we were getting ready to invade the outer islands of Japan, and they had thousands of kamikazes available. We'd already run into them in Okinawa. Our odds were getting slim.

DM: The bomb was your salvation?

FG: That was everybody's salvation. Ours right now. We lost, Japan lost 120,000 people with those two bombs. General LeMay, in his dropping of bombs in Tokyo ahead of time, killed 40 or 50,000.

DM: Yeah, the fire-bombing...

FG: They would've killed in the next year or two, they would've killed millions of Japanese. We only, we stopped the war by just killing maybe 120,000, not counting what was even more important, our lives. We saved—as Mr. Eisenhower

says, that if we'd had to go to Japan with their tenacious attitude—which they did have, believe me—we might've had a half a million casualties, which might've been a quarter of a million people dead. Because if you'd been to Japan, you'll notice that most of Japan, hundreds of miles, I think, of underground caverns, especially around the naval base in Yokosuka, which I've seen.

DM: So it would've been tough fighting.

FG: Everything was underground. They were prepared, probably, for that home invasion from the time that they dropped those bombs from that aircraft carrier, realizing it could come.

DM: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you for this interview. It's been very enlightening. And...

DM: Well that, probably, would be topic for another conversation. I hope we get a chance to do another interview. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW